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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: USCIRF MEETS THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION:
DISCOMFORT WITH THE RUHNAME

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) delegation's meeting with the Ministry of Education (MOE) was polite and lively, yet not particularly conclusive. Although Minister Muhammetgeldi Annamanov and his colleagues stressed that "of course" religious freedom was practiced in Turkmenistan, the topic of the Ruhnama caused significant discomfort. The Ministry's representatives were befuddled and even back-tracked when discussing President Niyazov's "Book of the Soul" and its role in education. The hurried discussion, as well as defensive and sometimes inconsistent comments by the ministry's top representatives, appeared to be an indicator that the future of the Ruhnama is uncertain. While there is no clear policy to lead the ministry or the country away from Niyazov's Ruhnama, it is clear that there is no longer a single, unified position on this topic. If we are patient, it will likely fade to an historic curiosity.
END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) met August 21 with officials from the Ministry of Education (MOE). As observed in prior meetings, MOE's International Department head, Nury Bayramov sat directly next to Minister Muhammetgeldi Annamanov and displaced Deputy Minister for elementary and secondary schools Gulshat Mammedova one space farther away. This pattern again indicated Bayramov's strong influence within MOE.

REVIEW OF EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

13. (SBU) USCIRF Chairman Michael Cromartie started his discussion with an open-ended question about the ministry's involvement with the United States in educational and exchange programs. Disappointingly, Minister Annaamanov appeared unable to answer this question in detail. When asked for detail, he turned to the Head of MOE's International Department, Nury Bayramov, who gave a fairly complete list of the U.S. Government Exchange Programs and Peace Corps activities in Turkmenistan and emphasized the quality of Turkmenistan's cooperation in these programs (COMMENT: Bayramov's words belied his own interference in the implementation of these

programs and intimidation perpetrated against program candidates and alumni. END COMMENT.) Minister Annaamanov added a few comments about the great attention paid to education by President Berdimuhamedov and recited the key reform steps the president had taken since assuming the presidency.

THE PINK AND GREEN ELEPHANT IN THE CURRICULUM

14. (SBU) Chairman Cromartie asked about the role of the Ruhnama, the late President Niyazov's "book of the soul" written as part history, part cultural identity, part behavioral guide, and part spiritual guide for the Turkmen. The mere question brought confused looks and rushed comments between Minister Annamanov and his colleagues. Annamanov used the word "sacred" in referring to the Ruhnama, then turned to his staff to help him explain how much the book is used in the curriculum. Bayramov and Deputy Minister Mammedova both hurriedly explained that only one hour of class time per week is dedicated to the Ruhnama. (NOTE: The Ruhnama is also integrated in classes on Turkmen history, literature and culture, thus only one hour of class time entitled "Ruhnama" is misleading. END NOTE.)

15. (SBU) Deputy Minister Mammedova explained that one hour per week is sufficient because students end up reading the Ruhnama "of their own will" because it is such a "spiritual book" that leads to "purity," a standard formulation of the Niyazov era. This commentary moved Commissioner Talal Eid, the Muslim imam of the delegation, to raise concerns that a "spiritual" book was part of the required curriculum. He went on to express his concern for the use of Ruhnama quotes and the lack of Koranic verses that he observed at the Gypjak Mosque, a Niyazov-era, self-aggrandizing project and the largest mosque in Central Asia. Stressing his respect for local culture and the Ruhnama, Eid made the point that

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the Gypjak mosque would be offensive to any practicing Muslim and could even contribute to Islamic extremism. Mammedova qualified her use of "spiritual," saying that it was more of a "historical, cultural, and philosophical" book showing Turkmen their past and their future. She subsequently avoided use of the word "spiritual." (NOTE: The curriculum lists the course as "Saparamurat Turkmenbashy's Sacred Ruhnama," and the word "Ruhnama" means "book of the soul" or "spirit." END NOTE.)

16. (SBU) Minister Annaamanov and Bayramov attempted to defend the Ruhnama, while stressing that Turkmenistan practices complete "freedom of religion." Annamanov advised that anyone who read the Ruhnama would see that it calls on the people to follow the principles of Islam. (NOTE: He failed to address Eid's concern that elevating the Ruhnama's status in mosques was itself a violation of Islamic principles or that a required course would call on students to follow a particular religion. END NOTE.) In side comments with Bayramov, the minister also quipped that the Soviets had modified religion, so it was not so strange that "we would too," causing Bayramov to roll his eyes with a mixture of disgust and bewilderment. Later the Minister noted that anyone can follow any faith. He highlighted major religious organizations play a role in instilling values in youth, and help in anti-drug awareness campaigns. Annaamanov also pointed to patterns of tolerance among different religious groups as evidence of religious freedom.

17. (SBU) In his turn, Bayramov tried to explain that religion was still in the process of "modernizing." He stressed that no one was forced to worship in the Gypjak mosque, so the possible offense to Muslims was not so severe. He ended with a comment about his own faith and hope that Allah accepts his prayers.

18. (U) The remainder of the discussion allowed MOE officials to talk about curriculum, class hours, and school conditions in general. The deputy minister underlined that all education is free, including textbooks.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: This meeting broke relatively new ground on education and religious freedom in Turkmenistan. However, the subject of the Ruhnama -- once an irrefutable cornerstone of national and educational policy -- revealed much more. The hurried

discussion as well as defensive and sometimes inconsistent comments by the ministry's top representatives were an indicator that the future of the Ruhnama is uncertain. While there is no clear policy to lead the ministry or the country away from Niyazov's Ruhnama, it is clear that there is no longer a single, unified position on this topic. If we are patient, Ruhnama will likely fade quietly away until it becomes an historic curiosity.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: Unfortunately, the meeting also showed that the obstructionist Nury Bayramov continues to play an influential role in the Ministry of Education. END COMMENT

HOAGLAND